

Survival show competitor raises his son in Sisters Country

By T. Lee Brown
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Survival skills educator and television show contestant Joel van der Loon moved to Sisters Country with his family a couple years back. Access to the outdoors combined with a sense of community drew them here to raise their son, Talon, now three years old.

Though Sisters School District offers little outdoor or nature-based education for younger children, the van der Loons found area schools “very attractive, especially with their outdoor programs,” such as the high school’s Interdisciplinary Environmental Expedition course.

The formative years of childhood are ideal for connecting with nature and learning survival skills. Van der Loon wants that for his son. His own youth in Africa was full of such adventures.

His father was a fishing boat captain in Tanzania, in East Africa. He bought a “patch of wild land” with the village chief’s blessing, then employed indigenous Masai people, traditional nomadic herders, to “keep an eye out for wildlife and illegal trappers on the property,” said van der Loon. “We had lions, hyenas, dangerous snakes, baboons.”

They built a house and dug a well, then mostly used solar and wind power. Van der Loon, who lived part-time in South Africa with his mother, moved to his father’s land full-time when he turned 18. “It was unbelievable,” he said. “Rural African coast, remote bush, lions, hyena, all the different wildlife.” He relished catching snakes, hunting wild boar, growing fruit trees, and raising chickens.

“It was kind of like a homestead,” he explained. “We learned how to be resourceful. Something’s broken out there, you learn to fix it. There’s no Home Depot.”

The Masai “were very, very in tune with the natural world,” said van der Loon. “To have them overseeing it

made sense. As a kid I was fascinated with the Masai. They would take me hunting, tracking with them, tell me stories about their culture. It really influenced my passion in the primitive skills, native skills. I was lucky, very lucky.” *Note: the complexity of African colonial and racial history is beyond the scope of this article.*

A recent solo survival adventure brought van der Loon to the Arctic for many days, as a participant in the History Channel TV show “Alone” (see related story, page 3). He said of his time there, “I had such a big realization into how we should be living as human beings. I feel we have strayed very, very far from how we want to be subconsciously. I had a personal revelation. More simplicity, less distraction, maintaining a connection with the plants and animals, being a good steward for them, is really important for me to do.”

He felt stimulated by living off the land, providing for himself, and “having the time to really get introspectively deep, not having any distraction to pull me out of it.”

Similar trips he’s taken in the past only involved 2–10 days of solo time.

“It takes a couple weeks to break through to that different state of consciousness,” van der Loon said. “My senses were heightened.”

He felt strongly that modern life is filled with too much distraction.

“I don’t believe our human brains are built for that,” he said.

Researchers would agree. Studies in recent years have found that pervasive technology and distraction are having harmful effects on brain development, physical health, and mental wellbeing — especially those of young people.

Three-year-old Talon “walks barefoot, shoots a bow-and-arrow, hunts, eats food at times with dirty soil hands so he gets microbes into him.” Van der Loon explained, “He’s a happy child, extremely engaged in

the outdoors. I’m trying to influence him but not pressure him. I feel like so many kids [at that age] gravitate towards running around, digging in the dirt.”

Unfortunately, they’re often corralled indoors by well-intentioned parents and teachers. Some are worried about lawsuits. Others focus on germs. However, current research shows that children exposed to more microbes — such as those found in soil and on farms and even in daycare socializing — grow up healthier, with fewer serious autoimmune disorders and everyday allergies.

Some parents and educators avoid nature education because they themselves lack experience. They might not have outdoor skills or feel comfortable around insects.

Talon van der Loon won’t have to worry about that.

“Talon can identify rabbit tracks, deer tracks, elk tracks, a handful of different medicinal plants in the area,” his father said proudly.

“I’m trying to keep old skills alive because I feel like that’s what strengthens our connection to our natural world,” he said.

Van der Loon believes this connection affects how humans treat our environment.

“A person that can step out into nature and feel at home, as opposed to feeling home within concrete walls, will definitely feel inclined to protect it — protect the wildlife, protect the natural resources,” said van der Loon.

Research supports this stewardship idea. Spending time in nature as a child has been linked to higher environmental awareness and activism as an adult.

Research also shows consistently that time spent in nature and the outdoors improves outcomes for all age groups. It is especially important for children and teens, who are currently battling an epidemic of increased anxiety, depression, and suicide.

“Hiking, gazing to the outdoors, making a deeper level of connection... understanding tracking, bird language, the plants, what they offer us



PHOTO PROVIDED

Three-year-old Talon van der Loon learns archery and gets his recommended daily allowance of muddy microbes in Sisters Country.

for food and medicine,” van der Loon said. “How to make fire by picking up sticks and rubbing them together... These things inspire connection with our ancestors, with

the earth.”

Such a strong connection goes beyond merely surviving. Alone in the Arctic, said van der Loon, “I felt more alive than I have ever felt.”



PHOTO PROVIDED

Joel van der Loon learned survival skills from indigenous peoples in Africa during his youth. He continued as an adult, learning from Masai, Hadzabe, and Rama tribespeople.

SUDOKU SOLUTION

for puzzle on page 28

2	9	8	3	5	7	4	1	6
4	3	1	2	6	9	8	7	5
7	5	6	4	1	8	2	9	3
9	2	5	8	7	6	1	3	4
1	6	7	5	3	4	9	2	8
8	4	3	1	9	2	5	6	7
6	8	4	7	2	1	3	5	9
5	7	2	9	4	3	6	8	1
3	1	9	6	8	5	7	4	2

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